Seven Things You Should Know about
Competency-based Education

1. CBE is based on demonstrating proficiency in prescribed areas. A student gets credit once he or she exhibits maturity in a competency. He or she must be actually, demonstrably proficient. Traditional programs are built around time and inputs, placing a premium on seat-hours and participation in a course. They focusing on means. By contrast, CBE focuses on ends, emphasizing proficiency in educational goals.

2. The CBE curriculum is built around a spectrum of carefully formulated competencies. Well-formulated competencies dial in on very exact areas. Some competencies are knowledge-oriented, but CBE opens up possibilities for focusing on skill and character. Some competencies are basic and others integrative. Many organizations already use educational goals that are sibling to competencies: student learning objectives, program outcomes, etc. But competencies are very carefully crafted to make sure the end is exact. Students, employers, and accreditors alike appreciate competencies for their transparency.

3. CBE requires really good assessment. Because CBE is so attentive to ends, it needs high quality assessment systems. Every competency requires one or more artifacts to be submitted. The curriculum should specify which artifact and which kind of evaluation is appropriate. Standardization protocol and rubrics help. But CBE requires good evaluators. Because CBE often uses pass/fail assignments that can be done repeatedly until proficiency is reached, students benefit from robust feedback loops.

4. CBE can be amazingly flexible in terms of content and timing. Since the end is in mind, not the means, customization is often encouraged. One student may learn best through reading; the next through videos or a hands-on experience. One student may best demonstrate proficiency by writing a report; the next student may be better served by an on-the-job project or structured interview. So too with timing. One student may finish a competency in a week. The next may be working on it off and on for a month. A good CBE system will make appropriate allowances.

5. CBE can be made to fit inside a course-based, credit hour structure. CBE is often conceived as a unique paradigm that does not use traditional courses or credit hours. Instead, credit is granted at the very moment a student has mastered a competency. This "direct assessment" model requires special permission from accreditors – and has come under the scrutiny of the Department of Education along the way. But you don't have to do "pure" CBE. There are a few institutions that have found ways to implement the riches of CBE *inside* a course-based, credit hour structure, thus making the transition to the competency-based paradigm less disruptive.

6. The CBE model is one of the fastest growing educational movements. CBE has been around since the early 1970s, yet only in the past decade has it taken off. Web-based technologies have empowered schools to communicate and deliver content in very creative ways. Schools are seeing CBE as a healthier alternative than all-online programs or accelerated courses. Well over 600 post-secondary institutions are now competency-based. One is even seeing competency-based graduate programs.

7. CBE is more doable than ever. But having help is a good idea. A number of models have been experimented with, and best practices are coming into focus. Gone are the days when schools needed to take extreme risks by moving through uncharted waters. Nevertheless, CBE is a paradigm shift, and one that calls for special assistance. Organizations like C-BEN and CAEL can provide invaluable resources. Guides like Sevensided Consulting can help you navigate the remarkable perils and opportunities ahead.